

In Ghalib's Labyrinthine Lanes

He was as much a man of letters as he was a creator of sublime verse

By RALPH RUSSELL

ONE wonders what the somewhat pretentious word "creative" is supposed to indicate—a point to which I shall return later. But first let us look at the book in its context. In 1969, *Ghalib, Life and Letters*, by myself and Khurshidul Islam, was published simultaneously in the US and UK. (An *our* edition is still in print.) It remains, as far as I know, the fullest treatment of Ghalib's life and is, I'd claim, no less "creative" than the work under review. But a friendly critic pointed out to me that although Ghalib is known mainly as a great poet, our book did not adequately reflect this. Prigarina's book more than remedies this deficiency and for this deserves high praise; and if I now go on to point out important defects I would not wish this to obscure its virtues.

The welcome weight given to Ghalib's poetry owed more to quantity than quality. There is a lot of mere padding in the narrative. The author's vaunted "creativity" expresses itself mainly in the interweaving of the poetry with the incidents of Ghalib's life. This is an entirely appropriate method and is effectively used—but not always in justifiable ways. The great danger here arises from the fact that as the author correctly states (on page 126), "it is practically impossible to find out when one or (the) other verse was written, whereas in order to visualise the story of a poet's life as the biography of his heart one should at least know when he wrote a particular verse." This does not mean that one can't illustrate the significance of a particular incident by quoting a verse which was not in fact composed for that purpose. The author does this, for example, on page 310, where she aptly says that "the poetic motif of one of his earlier ghazals becomes unexpectedly relevant" at this point. But she quite often quotes verses at different points in the narrative in a way which leaves the reader to assume that these were composed at the time of the event being narrated. The most glaring example is on pages 109-110 where a complete ghazal lamenting the death of his beloved is stated to be "dedicated to the death of a *domni*"; and this is said to be "a fact confirmed by all the biograp-

hers". The first statement is probably false and the second entirely so.

A great weakness of the book is that its author often fails to give due weight to Ghalib's perfectly clear and unequivocal attitudes, and prefers her own "creative" interpretations to his. This is specially evident in her treatment of his attitude to the 1857 revolt. There's absolutely no reason to doubt that the utter loathing and contempt which he expresses for the mutinous sepoys and their supporters is exactly what he felt, and the suggestion that these views were expressed as a ploy to curry favour



Ghalib: playing Persian against Urdu

with the British is unwarranted. That Ghalib's contempt was genuine is clear from his letters to his friends, but his creative biographer does not scruple to suppress this. In a letter which she mistakenly says was written to Hakim Ghulam Najaf Khan—it was in fact one to Tufta—there is a sentence in which he laments the loss of his friends, both English and Indian. He writes: "The English whom these infamous black scoundrels slaughtered," but Prigarina in quoting this letter omits the words I have italicised.

Thus the "creative" author often fails to use some of Ghalib's own much more creative writing about his experiences. For example, she gives little attention to his devotion to his "grand-

children". Yet there is a wonderfully vivid expression of his love for these two mischievous, unruly boys in his letter to Tufta dated June 18, 1852.

Another glaring omission is the absence of a proper evaluation of Ghalib's letters, second only to his Urdu verse as the basis of his fame—and there is no mention of Ghalib's own estimate of them and of how he at first absolutely prohibited their publication and then changed his mind and himself made every effort to collect them.

Like everybody else, she quotes Ghalib's exaggerated exaltation of his Persian verse over his Urdu, and fails to note his equally exaggerated assertion of the exact opposite. If people cry "Can Urdu then put Persian verse to shame?" recite a line of Ghalib's verse and tell them "Yes, like this!"

She also seems totally unaware of the existence of the important collection of Ghalib's letters, *Nadirat-i-Ghalib*, published in 1949 but not even listed in her bibliography. This is full of his delightfully uninhibited praise of his own Urdu verse and includes the humorous claim that it is greatly superior to that of his great predecessors Mir and Sauda.

A word about the production of the book. Readers accustomed to our traditional high standards will be disappointed in the marked lapse from them in evidence here. Our editors have not done their job properly. For example, Ghalib's famous prophecy about the fate of his verse is mistranslated on page x; and yet a correct (if not very elegant) translation of the same verse is given in page 244.

(Incidentally, the translations throughout the book are disappointing.) There are no notes, and for many important quotations given in the main text no sources are given. Neither is this deficiency made good in the totally inadequate bibliography.

Having said all that, let me reiterate that the book is a valuable and generally well-written. So buy or borrow it and read it. You will enjoy it. ■

(Ralph Russell is the author of *Ghalib: Life and Letters*.)



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